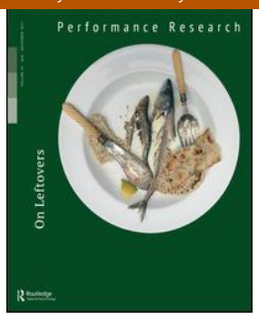

Performance Research
A Journal of the Performing Arts

ISSN: 1352-8165 (Print) 1469-9990 (Online) Journal homepage: http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rprs20

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To cite this article: Frederik Le Roy (2017) Ragpickers and Leftover Performances, Performance Research, 22:8, 127-134, DOI: 10.1080/13528165.2017.1433391

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/13528165.2017.1433391

Published online: 16 Apr 2018.

Ragpickers and Leftover Performances

Walter Benjamin's philosophy of the historical leftover

FREDERIK LE ROY

> Method of this project: literary montage. I needn't *say* anything. Merely show. I shall purloin no valuables, appropriate no ingenious formulations. But the rags the refuse – these I will not inventory but allow, in the only way possible, to come into their own: by making use of them.
> Walter Benjamin (2002 [1999]: 460)

> For Benjamin, … the truth of history is performed when we take the risk of making history rather than assuming it to belong only to the past. It happens, in other words, when we understand historicity as a kind of performance rather than as a story or a form of knowledge.
> Eduardo Cadava (1997: 72–3)

Walter Benjamin's philosophy of history, one could argue, can be read as a philosophy of the historical leftover. In the notes posthumously assembled under the title *Das Passagen-Werk* (translated in English as *The Arcades Project*) he famously states that instead of re-telling the celebrated events of history, his dialectical method intends to 'show' or 'allow' 'the rags, the refuse' of history (Benjamin 2002 [1999]: 460, from now on abbreviated as AP). The scholarly reception of Benjamin's unfinished magnum opus is vast and the critical debates about the status of this heterogeneous compilation of bibliographical notes, philosophical reflections and (many) citations have not been settled yet. It is not my intention to repeat those debates here, instead, I want to follow Freddie Rokem's evocative suggestion that throughout his philosophical writings, Benjamin 'develops intricate performative strategies' (2009: 5). I want to focus on how Benjamin's book project on the materialist history of the 'dreamworlds' of the nineteenth-century consumer society proposes a methodology that is premised on making historical leftovers perform. At the centre of this methodology is the historical figure (and performative strategy) of the *Lumpensammler* or ragpicker.

In comparison to the collector or the flâneur who make regular appearances on the stage of the modern metropolis portrayed in *The Arcades Project*, the ragpicker only pops up on a few occasions. For Benjamin, he is nonetheless an emblematic figure in the cultural history of social and economic deprivation produced by the nineteenth-century metropolis in thrall of industrialization and consumer capitalism. Benjamin's attention for whom he calls 'the most provocative figure of human misery' (AP: 349), shows his determination to install the cultural outcasts, those precarious subjects who live on society's margins and remain unmarked in the

Eugène Atget, Rag-and-bone man's house. Porte de Montreuil extra-muros (20 arr.), 1910.

PERFORMANCE RESEARCH 22·8 : pp.127-134
http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13528165.2017.1433391
ISSN 1352-8165 print/1469-9990 online

historicist accounts of history, as central figures in any historical endeavour.[1] But the ragpicker for Benjamin is more than an (often neglected) subject matter of historical study; he is a *figuration* of the materialist historian he envisioned with his project. In describing his historical methodology as a form of 'literary montage', 'making use' of 'the rags, the refuse' (AP: 460) Benjamin puts the ragpicker at the centre of his endeavour to develop an alternative, anti-historicist, materialist historiography. As Irving Wohlfarth states, 'there is a sense that the whole Passagen-Werk is reflected in the "dialectical image" of the chiffonnier' (2006: 13). The ragpicker who roamed the streets to gather waste material, *embodies* the writing of history as a performative practice premised on gathering snippets of historical waste material and re-assembling them in collage-like juxtapositions that have the potential to produce unseen and unforeseen 'dialectical images'.

FROM THE FLÂNEUR TO THE RAGPICKER

But what constitutes this practice of the ragpicker? And how does it suggest a historical methodology that challenges historicist approaches to history? It is helpful here to first explore some of the similarities between the ragpicker and another equally peripatetic figure on the street of the modern metropolis, namely the flâneur. While, sociologically speaking, they are each other's opposite – the well-off flâneur wanders for leisure rather than work – both follow a similarly capricious trajectory that is not directed by a predetermined destination but is plotted out gradually, step by step, by the different objects that attract and momentarily transfix their attention. Apart from these spatial affinities, the flâneur and the ragpicker are fundamentally linked in *The Arcades Project* because they embody a similar type of historical experience, that, like remembrance, accentuates a discontinuous rather than a continuous relationship between past and present, and takes the monadic fragment rather than the totalizing (over)view as its foundation. To understand the ragpicker as a figuration of the historian who deals with leftover histories, it is therefore useful to explore this other city-dweller's historical experience further, to then see how they crucially diverge.

It is well-known that Benjamin instigated an extensive critical body of work about the flâneur as a key figure in the nineteenth century culture of spectacle.[2] What often remains overlooked, however, is the way in which flânerie in *The Arcades Project* also involves acts of historical remembrance. Benjamin writes of the flâneur that he (and yes, the flâneur for Benjamin is always male)[3] stores 'time as a battery stores energy' (AP: 107). This image of the walking body storing time, resonates with the idea of *durée* (duration) introduced by Benjamin's contemporary Henri Bergson: the idle walking of the flâneur foregrounds an experience of time as a continuous, indivisible stream that defies the external, measured and measurable time of capitalism.[4] However, the 'storing of time' not only refers to the extended time of duration but also to a discontinuous temporality of the past jolting into the present, charging up the flâneur with the energy of the past. For the flâneur, Benjamin writes, the asphalt always has a 'double ground' (AP: 417). The first ground is connected with the present and embodied experience of the *now* extended with every step for the duration of the walk, while the second ground is connected with a distant *then* that suddenly erupts from the depths of time. 'The street conducts the flâneur into a vanished time. For him, every street is precipitous' (AP: 417), Benjamin writes.[5] How does this function? The flâneur is an expert detective[6] who approaches the city as a collection of clues, that serve as indices to the city's past. His knowledge of the city makes previously mute urban fragments like ornaments, street names or even the geographical lay of the land, speak. The extent to which the urban space 'winks at the flâneur' (AP: 418–19) becomes clear when Benjamin writes how a flâneur walking past the Notre-Dame-de-Lorette church is reminded by the angle of his feet and the strain in his calves of

[1] On the representation of and fascination for the ragpicker in the nineteenth century see Benjamin (2003a) and Prendergast (1992: 84)

[2] His essays anticipate later analyses of the flâneur as a symptom for the reconfiguration of the public sphere in the urban culture of spectacle (Sennett 1977: 185ff), a figure who 'unlocks the pleasures of modern spectatorship' (Schwartz 1998: 9), a subjectivity that foreshadows the consumer (Schwartz 2001), the tourist (Urry 2002: 12–47) or the film goer (Gunning 1997).

[3] Like many of the literary critics before and after him, Benjamin fails to offer a gender critique of the flâneur. For feminist readings of the flâneur see Wolff (1985) and Nord (1995). Although Benjamin quotes historical accounts that the unskilled labour of ragpicking can also be done by women and children (AP: 703), he does not develop this.

[4] The flâneur's resistance to the temporal regime of the industrial age is best exemplified by the anecdote of the short fashion of taking turtles out for a walk. See AP: 106 and Benjamin's essay *On some motifs in Baudelaire (2003b)*.

[5] The background of this quote is Benjamin's autobiographical text *Berlin Childhood around 1900* (2006) written between 1932–38 in which the cityscape of Berlin leads to his own individual past. In *The Arcades Project* this vanished time is no longer the Proustian remembrance of the individual lost time but the memory to a collective, often politically charged, past.

[6] The detective is another double of the flâneur; see Le Roy (2012: 187ff) for an extensive discussion.

the 'dead fact' that at that exact point an extra horse used to be added to the coaches leading up to the hill of the burrow of Montmartre (AP: 417).

The flâneur is schooled in interpreting the urban environment in the same way that the biologist is schooled in interpreting nature – the flâneur 'went botanizing the asphalt' (AP: 372). The double ground of the city is of primordial importance: the historical remembrance implies an approach of the city as palimpsest or a temporal stratification that becomes unlocked, even just for a brief moment, in the historical experience of the flâneur. Benjamin calls the particular – often very transitory – historical remembrance of the flâneur 'anamnetic intoxication' (AP: 417) – *anamnesis*, from the Greek *ana-* (again) and *mneme* (remembrance), which can be translated as 're-remembrance', implying the repetition or return of something that existed before but has been forgotten or lost. During the 'anamnetic intoxication' the flâneur enters a state in which the separation between past and present becomes blurred. Past and present appear superposed or in overlap; time becomes spatialized (AP 418). The city becomes *raumgewordene Vergangenheit* or spatialized past (AP 872). Chronology is abandoned for simultaneity: the flâneur experiences the city as an assemblage of different fragments that, like the photographs assembled in an avant-garde photomontage or the different historical ornaments in the bourgeois interiors in the historical eclecticist style, are each shot through with their invisible historical provenance (AP 418–19; Doherty 2006 158-163). A similar temporality will also serve as the basis for the ragpicker's historical remembrance.

In many ways, the flâneur's 'anamnestic intoxication', which was inspired by surrealism, was the trigger for Benjamin's own research for *The Arcades Project*. However, during the 1930s he grew increasingly sceptical of the supposedly revolutionary potential (or, in his words, the 'profane illumination') of intoxication and narcosis that guided the flâneur's historical remembrance (Hanssen 2006: 9). The flâneur lingered in the realm of the dream, while Benjamin, inspired by Marxism, was looking for a 'constellation of awakening' that was only possible 'through the awakening of a not-yet-conscious knowledge of what has been' (AP 458). The materialist historian must create the 'constellation of awakening' that forges the 'anamnestic intoxication' into a form of historical remembrance Benjamin will call *Eingedenken*. However, the historical experience of the flâneur does leave important theoretical traces: Benjamin retains the possibility of an associative historical remembrance, in which the past *jumps up* in the present and chronological temporality is suspended by the superposition of historical fragments. Moreover, the flâneur suggests that history can be a doing, a performance, which involves working on and with fragments that may suddenly make a forgotten past appear in the present. While the flâneur chases furtive sensations and remains a passive consumer of historical images, the ragpicker actively pursues waste, creating the potential to transform sudden acts of historical remembrance into a politics of memory. For Benjamin the ragpicker points towards the capacity to unlock the revolutionary potential stored in forgotten or wasted historical events.

REFUSING THE ARCHIVE

But how does the ragpicker make the historical leftover perform? The ragpicker is a liminal figure, literally living at the fringes of society: in Paris, they resided in shanty towns on the edge of town as part of the community of *zoniers* ('zone'-dwellers or those living in the transition space between the city and countryside). There, he brought old pieces of rags to be turned into paper or cardboard. Shards of glass or woods were recycled. Animal carcasses were skinned for fur, and the bones turned into glue, gelatine or phosphorus to be used in matches. Historically, he often falls in between the cracks, to the extent that even some of the most ardent defenders of the political agency of the precarious classes denied him the possibility

to attain a historical subjectivity. Karl Marx, for example, classified the *Lumpensammler* together with swindlers, fraudsters, prostitutes and panhandlers as *Lumpenproletariat*. For the revolutionary cause, the *Lumpenproletariat* is 'the refuse … of all classes' (Marx, Karl 1907 [1852]: 42), the waste material of history, an anti-revolutionary and even reactionary force, unable to attain class consciousness. Rather than from Marx's depiction of the ragpicker as a social parasite, dead weight on the train of history, Benjamin draws inspiration from the poet Baudelaire who, in his essay *Du vin et du haschisch*, likens the *chiffonnier* to an archivist or collector, attributing to him a creative rather than a destructive power (AP: 349-350). With the same devotion and attention to detail as the archivist, the ragpicker collects, organizes and catalogues the growing mountain of superfluous waste material produced by a society obsessed with the cult of the new. It is likely that Benjamin, while writing about the ragpicker, had before his eyes Eugène Atget's series of photographs of the shantytown dwellings of the ragpicker. These photographs show how the ragpicker would display their most priced pieces of trash on the front of their hut, not unlike the bourgeois collector (whose interiors were another favourite topic of both Benjamin and Atget) would do with his collection of precious items. Benjamin identifies this diligent archiving of 'everything [the great city] has lost, and discarded, and broken' (Baudelaire cited in AP: 349), with the aim of repurposing what, in the eye of the modern urbanite, has lost all purpose, with the historian in different ways.

Eugène Atget, Collector's Room. Rue de Vaugirard (15 arr.), 1910.

The ragpicker, first, stands for the undoing of established historiography and the institutions that support it. Aleida Assmann has pointed out that the rubbish dump and the archive, while seemingly each other's opposite, are inextricably connected. The limit between the archive and the rubbish dump marks the limit between what is and is not deemed of cultural value, and for that reason, archive and rubbish heap 'can be read as emblems and symptoms of cultural memory and forgetting' (Assmann 2006: 384, my translation). Refuse is what the archive refuses. For Assmann an archive of rubbish would make 'the invisible as such, namely the basic structures of the cultural production of value and non-value, visible' (ibid., my translation). In that sense, the ragpicker problematizes the inevitable 'archival violence' (Derrida 1996: 7–8) of the implicit systems of in- and exclusion underlying the foundation and maintenance of the archive. Even more, because the archive establishes the prior delimitations of how the present will be remembered in the future and (re)produces the conditions of possibility of future historical accounts, the ragpicker's diligent archiving of waste is not only a symbol for challenging existing master narratives in cultural memory, but also for the undoing of the conditions of possibility that enabled these master narratives. As Philip Rosen wrote: 'the only way to recover the elements excluded from conventional historiography is to reject its form and terms' (Rosen 2001: 15).

PUZZLING WITH WASTE

Here it is useful to draw the contrast between two types of memory in the work of Benjamin, namely, *Gedächtnis* and *Eingedenken*. Remembering as *Gedächtnis* is premised on a conception of the past as a coherent, chronologically structured repository of events, accessible to us at all times through processes of conscious remembering. *Gedächtnis* is the intentional act of retrieving memories from this repository. The way we (re)construct our personal life story as a coherent biography exemplifies how *Gedächtnis* is the product of a construction process that gives order to what is essentially a dispersed amalgam of memories, repressing that that does not fit the overall order we re-perform with each act of remembering. Crucially for Benjamin, *Gedächtnis* is not only found on the personal level but it also structures collective memory, for example, through the ritual celebration of cultural memory or the construction of historical narratives by the historian.

Eingedenken, the remembrance associated with the ragpicker, refers to the unexpected re-emergence of memories that do not fit this first type of memory. Reminiscent of the psychoanalytic notion of the *return of the repressed, Eingedenken* is not the result of deliberate historical research, but of the sudden, forceful resurgence of the past in the present.[7] On this moment of *Eingedenken*, the past suddenly erupts from the collective unconsciousness of a culture in what Benjamin famously calls a 'dialectical image' (AP: 469). It is a 'telescoping of the past through the present' (AP: 471). It is a moment of disruption of the continuum of history that, even if it is just for a fraction of a second, may suggest a new, alternative perspective on history and thus also an alternative present that might have been but never was.

This manifestation of the past in the present does not happen spontaneously but involves actively working with the traces of the discarded past, or, as Benjamin stated in his methodological remark about *The Arcades Project*: 'the rags the refuse – these I will not inventory but allow, in the only way possible, to come into their own: *by making use of them*' (460, my emphasis). Benjamin sees the *Lumpensammler* as a puzzler: again and again, he combines debris to discover if seemingly disparate fragments, once they are put next to one another, may suddenly start to communicate in unexpended ways. But unlike puzzles bought in a toy store, the ragpicker cannot rely on an image on the box depicting the pre-existing outcome of his act of puzzling. The puzzler is, for Benjamin, a 'brooder', 'a man who has arrived at the solution of a great problem but then has forgotten it'.[8] He broods not just about what he has forgotten but also about the process of forgetting itself (AP: 367). For the brooder, 'human knowledge' is 'something piecemeal – in an especially pregnant sense: it is like a jumble of arbitrary cut pieces from which a puzzle is assembled' (AP: 368). In the same way, the *Lumpensammler* puzzles with the debris of a fragmented world: he 'rummages here and there for a particular piece, holds it next to some other piece, and tests to see if they fit together.... The result can never be known beforehand, for there is no natural mediation between the two' (AP: 368). And it is while brooding, while going through the often slow and laborious process of rummaging through the debris of history, that *Eingedenken* may occur. Suddenly, a fragment of history may receive an acute actuality when it is put next to pieces of the present.

Historical remembrance becomes a politics of memory when historiography becomes an active, emancipatory practice, in which dealing with the past not only resists dominant historical narratives but also works in and on the present. Although the terminology may sometimes suggests otherwise (brooding, puzzling), historiography as ragpicking is far from playful or free from obligation. Making history, for Benjamin, is always associated with danger and disruption,[9] especially when we are confronted with the past's unfulfilled promises and failed revolutions whose revolutionary potential is stored in history even if they

[7] Resonating in Benjamin's theory is Marcel Proust's *mémoire involontaire*; see: AP: 388– 90 and AP: 393.

[8] The ragpicker, the puzzler and the brooder are linked in *The Arcades Project* with a re-introduction of the notion of allegory in Benjamin's theory of nineteenth-century modernity. It is not possible to explore Benjamin's rich approach of allegory (and the enormous body of academic works that it has engendered) further in the context of this article.

[9] When Benjamin wrote in 1939 that history to 'articulate the past historically' is not to know the past 'the way it really was' but 'appropriating a memory as it flashes up in a moment of danger' (Benjamin 2003c: 391), this danger took on a very concrete form in the advance of Nazism. However, danger also has a broader meaning beyond the historical context: see Löwy (2001: 51).

are thrown out of or calcified to inertia in traditional historical accounts. While puzzling with the past and creating collages of fragments of past and present, historical events that lay unrecognized in history can suddenly attain 'the now of a particular recognisability' (AP: 463), unlocking their revolutionary potential anew, not only changing existing representation of the past but also challenging us to act in the present. To puzzle is like 'quoting out of context in order to break the spell of calcified traditions, mobilizing the past by bringing it blazing into the present, and keeping history mobile in order to allow its objects to be historical agents once again' (Bishop 2013: 66).

Benjamin gives the example of how, during the French Revolution, ancient Rome leapt out of history to receive a particular actuality. The uprising against the monarchy was seen as a citation (AP: 476), a repetition out of it historical context, an anachronistic return of the Roman republic that was suddenly 'charged with now-time, a past basted out of the continuum of history' (Benjamin 2003c: 395). Similarly, the uprising of the Paris Commune of 1871, forgotten in most of the national histories of France, thrown into the wastebasket of history, is suddenly put in a constellation with the present during the May 1968 protest in Paris, or again, at the turn of the new millennium, in Peter Watkins' re-enactment of the events in his film *La Commune (Paris 1871)* (2000), or again during the Occupy Wall Street movement, a symptom of which is the staging of Brecht's play *The Days of the Commune* (1948–9) in Zuccotti Park in New York City, directed by the visual artist Zoe Beloff.[10] But not only large political events are the subject of *Eingedenken*; on the contrary, Benjamin's *The Arcades Project* is shot through with the sense that even the smallest fossils of a lost times, like fragments of the ruined arcades, unfashionable clothes, obsolete technologies, untimely texts, misunderstood art works or, for that matter, a historical figure like the ragpicker can suddenly regain actuality and be made to perform again.[11]

Unlike the temporality of *Gedächtnis*, the temporality of historical remembrance of *Eingedenken* suggest a confusion of linear temporality. This temporality underlying the ragpicker's historical remembrance or *Eingedenken* evokes Rebecca Schneider's notion of a 'cross- or multi-temporal engagement with im/material understood to belong to the past in the present' (Schneider 2001: 35). The non-chronological temporality of the performance of the ragpicker opens the possibility for the emergence of disruptive counter-memories. If past political or revolutionary actions 'stick' to the present – not locked up in history but enduring somehow, always potentially insisting in the present – these past events can start to act and act up again in the present.

TIME AND TIME AGAIN

The writing of history always has a performative component. Historiography does not reproduce a pre-existing reality but emerges out of the operations of texts, images, rhetoric, evocation narration, ritual repetition, acts of imagination and re-enactment and so on. Benjamin acknowledges, through his work, that history is inevitably determined by the present of its doing. Even in the supposedly objective historical representation of the past, the present of the historian 'will underlie his presentation in the form of a text written in invisible ink' (AP: 476). When we read this invisible ink we will uncover, in most cases, a history of oppression. Benjamin's aim, however, is not just to deconstruct history, but to make it perform differently, not as the reproduction of given relationships of power and oppression, but as an intervention and interruption in the present. With the ragpicker, Benjamin's historiography becomes especially performative: the idea of puzzling with fragments of the past presupposes the production of an experience in the historian and, eventually, in she who experiences the work of history. As a performative historiography, the *in-between* is made to perform: the time lag between past and present, the interval between the different fragments in the montage of waste materials, the space between the puzzle of fragments and the historian/spectator.

[10] See the online documentation of Beloff's project: *The days of the commune* (2012).

[11] And, indeed, we can ask ourselves who will write the history of today's ragpickers who dwell on the rubbish heaps in parts of the Global South, and, in some African regions, risk their health and safety to scavange the electronic waste of Europe and the United States.

The philosophy of the historical leftover also implies for Benjamin a provocative meta-historical idea drawn from Jewish messianic thought and summed up his 'On the concept of history' when he states that 'nothing that has ever happened should be regarded as lost to history'. (Benjamin 2003c: 390) Each constellation of salvaged fragments of history suggests that the whole of history – including the repressed and forgotten histories of social and political injustices – may one day be remembered. The possibility of *Eingedenken* as the productive citation of a fragment of the past in the present, is premised on the citability of history as a whole. Benjamin's proposition that history only succeeds when 'the entire past is brought into the present' (AP: 459), seems impossible to attain, if not absurd, and has been the subject of numerous debates.[12] However, one productive way to understand this messianic idea is not as an actual 'salvation of history' – the theological idea of the future 'apocatastasis' (AP: 459) – but from the perspective of what Eduardo Cadava calls Benjamin's 'finite messianism' (Cadava 1997: 144).[13] The salvation of history is not coming from outside of history, from an external, godly force. Instead, the idea of salvation of history as a whole should be understood as a promise continually existent in the here-and-now that urges us to action in the present. In that sense, the Benjaminian notion of the now-time is crucial: the focal point of any impulse for change is always in the now. The flash of historical remembrance can interrupt given narratives about the past, arrest the present in its tracks and offer a brief insight into the potential for change. However, that historical memory brought about by historical ragpicking is but a flash that, like lighting in the night, disappears as quickly as it had appeared. More important than the flash itself, therefore, is the after-image that is left on the retina, changing our view of the present, altering our outlook on the future, and compelling us to act. It impels us to act, time and time again, in the now, as if every historical wrong can be righted, as impossible, hopeless or absurd that project may appear.

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[12] These debates fit in the larger discussion about the intertwining of messianism and Marxism in the later work of Benjamin. See Wolin (1981); Wohlfarth (1986); Löwy (2001).

[13] There are at least two key important issues with regards to the Benjaminian messianic redemption of the historical past. First, does Benjamin really believe that this 'historical apokatastais' will save history in its entirety, redeeming all historical wrongs? In this regard, Max Horkheimer poignantly remarked in a letter to Benjamin Max Horkheimer that those who died in history will remain dead, implying that historical injustices will never be fully rectified (Löwy 2001: 37). Second, if messianic redemption is always possible, that is, if the door for the arrival of the messiah is always ajar, as Benjamin writes, what with personal and collective action? Is there room for human agency (Blackie 2007: 134-6)? Eduardo Cadava's idea of 'finite messianism' re-opens the possibility of agency and intervention.

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